



STATE OF RHODE ISLAND AND PROVIDENCE PLANTATIONS
HISTORICAL PRESERVATION & HERITAGE COMMISSION

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**UNIVERSAL(IST) DESIGN:
WOONSOCKET CHURCH LISTED IN NATIONAL REGISTER**

(Woonsocket, R.I.) J. Paul Loether, Executive Director of the Rhode Island Historical Preservation & Heritage Commission, announced that the National Park Service has added the former First Universalist Church, now the headquarters of the American-French Genealogical Society, to the National Register of Historic Places. The National Register is the Federal Government's official list of properties throughout the United States whose historical and architectural significance makes them worthy of preservation. Erected in two phases in 1924 and 1957, the First Universalist Church represents the evolution of ecclesiastical architecture during the 20th century. The building is also significant to Woonsocket's religious history as the city's sole Universalist church for more than eighty years.

The First Universalist Church stands on the corner of Earle and Snow Streets in a residential neighborhood north of Downtown Woonsocket. The building consists of a two-story flat-roof block with a rear ell (built in 1924) and a one-story gable-roof addition (built in 1957), all in buff-colored brick with limestone trim. A square tower built as part of the 1957 addition connects the two blocks. Gothic Revival-style details on the 1924 structure include trefoil arch panels and drip moulding carved in limestone. The 1957 addition is notable for its nine stained glass windows depicting Biblical scenes.

The history of Universalism in Woonsocket, Rhode Island is intricately tied to the story of the Ballou family, notably Hosea Ballou (1771-1852) who has been called a "Father of Universalism" in the United States. Converted to Universalism as a young man, Hosea Ballou became a preacher, author, and publisher promoting the faith. Ballou visited Woonsocket numerous times in the first half of the 19th century, both to participate in business ventures and to foster a new Universalist congregation. The Woonsocket Universalist Society of Young Men was organized in 1834 and erected a building for the First Universalist Church in Downtown Woonsocket in 1840. Hosea Ballou preached the inaugural sermon.

By 1905, the congregation counted 500 members and had an active Sunday School. Around 1919, church leaders hired RISD-trained architect Gorham Henshaw (1879-1963) to design a new building for the flock just a few blocks north of Downtown in a more residential

setting. Henshaw produced drawings for a large gable-roof Gothic Revival church connected to a flat-roof parish hall. Only the flat-roof building was erected, but it incorporated spaces for worship, education, and other purposes. The First Universalist Church dedicated its new home in 1925.

In the 1950s, church leaders commissioned architect Arland A. Dirlam (1905-1980) to design a modern addition to its 1924 building. A graduate of Harvard's Graduate School of Design, Dirlam was a well-known practitioner of ecclesiastical design. In a 1956 interview with the Providence Journal, Dirlam suggested that "churchgoers [prefer] churches that are less expensive than traditional types and meet cultural, recreational, and religious needs." His 1957 addition to the First Universalist Church was case in point: a gracious new sanctuary that represented a more austere take on the Gothic Revival style and was clad in the same buff-colored brick and limestone as the 1924 building.

The addition to the First Universalist Church achieved a longstanding goal for the congregation. The space was further enhanced in 1958-62 when the firm of S. Janowski and Associates installed nine stained glass windows depicting Biblical scenes. Despite their strong financial footing, the First Universalist Church faced challenges of aging parishioners and declining membership by the 1980s. The congregation disbanded in 2007.

The church sold the property to the American-French Genealogical Society (AFGS), an organization founded in 1978 to provide historical and genealogical research assistance and to maintain special collections on the French-Canadian diaspora. The AFGS was an ideal successor; the organization had been renting space in the 1924 building since 1989. The second floor of the 1924 block currently serves as the home to the Veterans Memorial Museum, which displays a collection of military-related artifacts, many of which have special connections to Woonsocket residents.

The National Register nomination for the First Universalist Church was prepared by RIHPHC Architectural Historian Elizabeth Rochefort. RIHPHC's Executive Director J. Paul Loether commented, "The Commission is pleased to announce that this distinctive Woonsocket landmark has been listed in the National Register of Historic Places. The American-French Genealogical Society has been a thoughtful steward of the building. We are especially pleased that the National Register listing follows the completion of a State Preservation Grant to improve ADA accessibility. This historic building will remain a valuable community center for years to come."

In addition to honoring a property for its contribution to local, state, or national history, listing on the National Register provides additional benefits. It results in special consideration during the planning of Federal or federally assisted projects and makes properties eligible for Federal and Rhode Island tax benefits for historic rehabilitation projects. Owners of private property listed on the National Register are free to maintain, manage, or dispose of their property as they choose. As the state office for historic preservation, the RIHPHC is responsible for reviewing and submitting Rhode Island nominations to the National Register.

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